



Cascades Diversion Dam Removal

In the early part of the twentieth century, National Park Service Director Stephen T. Mather envisioned a “new Yosemite” where modern comforts of hot water, restaurants, and electricity could be experienced “to meet the ever-increasing demand for every type of experience.” In 1917, visitation reached a total of 34,510. This increased visitation meant a greater need for providing those modern visitor comforts, which ultimately led to the 1918 completion of the Cascades Diversion Dam and Hydroelectric Powerhouse.



What is the history of the dam?

The Cascades Diversion Dam is located on the main stem of the Merced Wild and Scenic River at the far west end of Yosemite Valley. The dam itself consists of “cribs” formed by logs or square timbers spiked together. These cribs were then filled with boulders and rocks and were anchored by concrete facing some 18 feet below the crest of the dam. The cribs were sheathed with rough-hewn redwood boards, which are visible during periods of low water. The dam spans 184 feet across, with a crest height of about 17 feet, flanked by 30-foot high concrete abutments. It currently impounds approximately 2.5 acres of water.

After 68 years of operation, the hydroelectric facility was taken off-line in 1985-86 due to the deteriorated and outdated condition of the entire power system. The National Park Service determined that the Cascades Diversion Dam should be scheduled for deactivation and removal. This process would involve removal of the dam's structural elements (including abutments, foundation, and greenhouse) along with removal of some portion of the sediment behind the dam.

A 1999 lawsuit on the El Portal Road Improvements Project resulted in halting plans to remove the dam until completion of an approved comprehensive management plan for the Merced Wild and Scenic River. A record of decision on the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan* (Merced River Plan) was signed in August 2000 and was revised in November 2000. In keeping with the prescriptions established in the Merced River Plan, the *Yosemite Valley Plan* calls for removal of the dam in order to restore natural channel grades and hydrologic processes along this segment of the river.

Why remove the dam?

Dam removal is necessary for several reasons. It currently serves as an impoundment on a Wild and Scenic River. Removing the dam is part of the park's overall intent to restore free-flowing conditions to the Merced Wild and Scenic River. In its present deteriorated condition, the dam also represents a significant public health and safety hazard due to potential uncontrolled collapse, a condition exacerbated by structural damage and weakening caused by the 1997 flood. Additionally, during periods of average to low water flow, the dilapidated wooden structure of the dam is exposed, creating a visual intrusion on an otherwise popular scenic location.

What is the status of the project?

Complete removal of the dam, dam abutments, the intake structure, the screenhouse, and restoration of the related river channel located beneath the dam site will occur in stages from November 2003 through the spring of 2004.

Currently, the intersection at El Portal and Big Oak Flat Roads in the west end of Yosemite Valley has been rerouted around the construction zone. Traffic delays may be possible throughout the dam removal process.

What previous planning occurred for this project?

A range of alternatives was presented in an environmental assessment for the project, released for public comment in February 2003. After all comments were analyzed by the National Park Service, a Finding Of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was approved in late spring 2003. This document determined that the dam removal (as analyzed in its environmental assessment) would not significantly affect the quality of the Merced Wild and Scenic River. Copies of the environmental assessment and decision documents may be viewed on the park's web site (www.nps.gov/yose/planning).

Public Participation

Public participation in the planning process is critical. Here are some ways to stay involved in the Cascades Diversion Dam Removal:

- Attend a public walk-through at the project site. These events will occur periodically during dam removal and will be announced on the park's planning web site (www.nps.gov/yose/planning) and through press releases.
- Add your name to the Planning Mailing List to receive the *Planning Update* newsletter, as well as other planning-related announcements.
- Send your email address (see below) to sign up for the park's new e-newsletter.
- Attend a National Park Service open house, regularly held in the Yosemite Valley Visitor Center East Auditorium. Check the park's planning web site at www.nps.gov/yose/planning for a schedule of dates and times.
- For more information on this and other Yosemite National Park projects, visit the park's planning web site at www.nps.gov/yose/planning or contact the park (see below).

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